DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 671 EC 304 963

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TITLE Staying in School: Strategies for Middle School Students with Learning & Emotional Disabilities. ABC Dropout Prevention and Intervention Series.

INSTITUTION California Univ., Santa Barbara. Graduate School of Education.; Minneapolis Public Schools, Minn.; Minnesota Univ., Minneapolis. Inst. on Community Integration.; Seattle Public Schools, Wash.; Washington Univ., Seattle. Coll. of Education.

SPONS AGENCY Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.

PUB DATE Dec 95

CONTRACT H023K0001; H023K0011; H023K0017

NOTE 27p.; For related documents, see EC 304 962-966.

AVAILABLE FROM Institute on Community Integration (UAP), University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive, S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455 ($8).

PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Behavior Disorders; *Dropout Prevention; Emotional Disturbances; Federal Programs; *High Risk Students; Hispanic Americans; *Intervention; Junior High Schools; Learning Disabilities; Middle Schools; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Student Development; Teamwork

IDENTIFIERS ABC Projects

ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the findings of three 5-year federally financed dropout prevention programs for high risk students and their families known as the ABC programs: ALAS (Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success), the Belief Academy, and Check & Connect. The information is based on a comprehensive report called "Staying in School: A Technical Report of Three Dropout Prevention Projects for Middle School Students with Learning and Emotional Disabilities." Information is provided on who the youth are and why they are at risk of dropping out, what works in preventing dropout, and how to tell if an intervention works. Five interrelated intervention elements that have been demonstrated to be effective in assisting youth to stay in school are discussed. These are: monitoring; relationships; affiliation; problem solving; and persistence, continuity, and consistency. Evidence of the effectiveness of the programs is provided and graphed using measures such as enrollment in school, academic performance, progress towards graduation, attendance, problem behaviors, and satisfaction. Among recommendations to school administrators are the following: develop a system to monitor student progress toward graduation; form a team of stakeholders to develop intervention strategies for high-risk students; and establish a systematic way to measure the effectiveness of interventions. Appendices include a description of the three ABC projects and a further explanation of the data used. (CR)

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Staying in School: Strategies for Middle School Students with Learning & Emotional Disabilities

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Part of the ABC Dropout Prevention & Intervention Series prepared by ALAS, Belief Academy, and Check & Connect

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Staying in School: Strategies for Middle School Students with Learning & Emotional Disabilities

Part of the ABC Dropout Prevention and Intervention Series

Published December, 1995.

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This product reflects the collective efforts of all project directors.
Publication design by Charles Gibbons.

The development of this publication was supported in part by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), through grant numbers H023K0001 (ALAS), H023K0011 (Belief Academy), and H023K0017 (Check & Connect). The content and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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Findings from the ABC Dropout Projects

About This Report

The purpose of this report is to summarize the findings of the ABC dropout projects, which addressed middle school dropout prevention and intervention. The projects, ALAS in Los Angeles, the Belief Academy in Seattle, and Check & Connect in Minneapolis, are described in detail in Appendix A. Our goal is to provide information about our findings that will help others concerned with dropout prevention.

These findings are based on three years of work in schools. When the projects started, the students were in seventh grade; these youth are presently in their first years of high school. It is still early to present a summary of findings, but funds for reporting are available now. Although the findings are promising at this time, with data for students in ninth grade, the story is incomplete. If we could continue our efforts, we would expect to see continued improvements in school success and in the post-school lives of these students.

While the three ABC projects focused primarily on adolescents with learning and emotional or behavioral disabilities, findings from the projects apply just as well to other students experiencing difficulties in school, particularly those students showing warning signs of school withdrawal.

In this report, information is provided on who the youth are and why they are at risk, what worked and how we know it worked, and what some of our recommendations are for the future. This information is based on a comprehensive resource document called *Staying in School: A Technical Report of Three Dropout Prevention Projects for Middle School Students with Learning and Emotional Disabilities*, which provides complete information on each of the projects.

Overview of the Projects

The school dropout is one of the more challenging problems for American education. The dropout problem has gained such importance in the economy of today that it has been targeted in Goal 2 of our national education goals.

Dropouts are not students who suddenly one day decide to quit school. Most students who have dropped out and the students at risk for dropping out have exhibited behavioral and academic histories of estrangement from school. Many have established patterns of poor attendance and tardiness. Many have had repeated negative experiences with the educational system. Many are students who have fallen through the cracks because of inconsistent or misunderstood messages from school, home, or peers.

Students with disabilities are at much greater risk of dropping out than other students. Nationally, about 35% of students with learning disabilities and 55% of students with emotional disabilities drop out before completing school, compared to about 25% of students in the general population. These were the students targeted by the ABC dropout projects.

Figure 1 · ABC Dropout Project Site Locations

Located in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Seattle (see figure 1, at left), the ABC projects addressed the dropout problem within the context of urban school districts with large percentages of students in poverty and students from economically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

The cities provided different contexts that went beyond geography. Although all projects started by emphasizing academic interventions, family-school collaboration, and access to community resources, the ways they were carried out eventually was shaped by the context within which each project was developed. Because of the different contexts and differences in the project approaches, we believe we have a richer picture of the dropout problem among youth with learning and emotional or behavioral disabilities than any single project alone.

- In Los Angeles, the project was established as a separate program available to targeted students and their parents. The students in this project were in a pull-out program and, along with their families, were assisted both outside and inside the school setting.
- In Minneapolis, the project was neither completely part of the school nor completely outside it. The project worked both with school personnel and with students and their families. Students in this project remained the responsibility of school personnel, with project personnel collaborating to provide assistance to the students and their families.
- In Seattle, the project became the school. Students and parents were asked for their commitment to the program. Students were the responsibility of project personnel.

Keeping students from dropping out clearly isn't a simple matter. It is a challenge that requires different perspectives and approaches. The ABC projects summarized here reflect these multiple perspectives on the complex challenge of keeping high risk youth in school, and together provide important information that can be useful to educators.

Effective Intervention Elements

All projects documented important outcomes for students considered to be at high risk for dropping out of school. Interventions used in all projects focused on the school setting, home-school collaboration, and community involvement. Within and across these spheres of influence, the following key elements were identified:

- Monitoring
- Relationships
- Affiliation
- Problem solving
- Persistence-Plus

In all cases, project personnel made available at least one school-based person with whom each student could develop a relationship. Through monitoring, this adult knew what the students were doing, both good – attending classes, getting to class on time, showing appropriate behaviors, and so on – and not so good – skipping classes, being tardy, getting suspended, failing classes, etc. Students could not pretend to be doing fine if indeed they were not. Avenues for developing an affiliation with the school were provided for students who had not taken advantage of such opportunities before. Students were helped to develop skills to solve problems on their own, particularly social problems. Project personnel communicated to the students that they were not going to give up on them and encouraged students not to give up on themselves.

An array of individualized strategies that encompassed the intervention elements were used to meet unique student needs. These included, for example, mentoring, collaboration with parents, continuous tracking of attendance, monitoring class performance and behavior, and relationship building.

■ An Example of Intervention

An array of individualized strategies that encompassed the effective intervention elements met unique student needs. For example, during her first year in the program, Tina was easily discouraged, seemed to have very low self-esteem, displayed disorganization and messiness, was often involved in conflicts with peers, and cried frequently because of low grades and conflicts with other students.

In the program, the staff worked first with Tina on her organizational skills. A case manager found medical and dental resources for the family, and Tina participated in a "girls group" to address peer conflicts. Academic instruction was individualized to maximize success, and a university tutor met with Tina weekly for two years. Tina often was included in the tutor's family activities, and the tutor and Tina frequently talked on the phone.

Tina began to play basketball and football, increasing both her self-esteem and her ability to make friends. Tina also had the opportunity to tutor at an elementary school, where she worked closely with one teacher and a number of students, and was respected and considered to be very effective. As she became active in additional out-of-school activities like dance group and choir, program staff worked with Tina and her family on how best to manage her schedule and time demands. By the end of the program, Tina had gained academic and social skills, became involved in community and school sports, and was in the pre-college option program with plans to attend college.

Continuing Challenges

Despite their varied locations and contexts, the ABC projects struggled with some common challenges:

- High rates of student mobility, due to either family- or school-initiated changes
- Threats to the basic survival and general well-being of students and their families
- A significant need for continued interventions or support into high school and within the larger community

For a few students and their families (a number much smaller than typically perceived by school personnel), the ABC project interventions did not seem to be enough to make a

practical difference in their lives. These were students and families whose needs seemed to exceed the resources that could be provided, or with challenges so great that school-based accommodations did not seem to meet their needs.

These students seemed to be enmeshed in a web of multiple complexities and challenges (no phone; homelessness; illiterate parents; drug use; peers out of school; parents and siblings who dropped out of school; etc.) that made reaching them very, very difficult. Still, project personnel did not give up on them, continuing to let them know that someone was available at any time to help in any way possible.

■ An Example of Continuing Challenges

Continuing challenges made reaching some students difficult. José, for example, was born when his mother was fifteen years old. José's father had been killed in a shooting incident shortly after his birth. José and his family really had no place of their own to live. José, his siblings, and his mother moved each night between various relatives' houses. Decisions about where José slept often were made in the evening, based on which relatives had room that night, and he didn't often sleep where his mother and siblings slept.

During his time in the program, José's mother was able to move into an apartment with José and his siblings. After paying rent and utilities each week, all José's mother had left over from welfare and social security was fifteen dollars plus food stamps. The apartment had no furniture or beds, but did have mattresses on the floor and a refrigerator and stove. When the first winter came with heavy rains, the apartment leaked so badly that the carpets and mattresses became soaked and eventually mildewed. José's mother refused to apply for public housing because she feared that the "projects" were dangerous and crime-ridden.

When José was in ninth grade, his mother disappeared for five days. When someone called protective services because four children were home alone, protective services would not intervene because José was of "baby-sitting age." The mother had been arrested and jailed, and the police did not check to see whether any unsupervised children were left at home. José took care of himself and his siblings.

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Who Are These Students & Why Are They At Risk?

At-Risk Adolescents

The demographic characteristics of the students who were in the three projects are like those of students in most major urban centers today. More than half of the students were receiving free or reduced price lunches, residing in a one-parent family, and from an African American or Latino heritage.

Table 1 displays the demographics of the ABC dropout projects' school districts. One should note that ALAS provided interventions to forty-six high-risk students without disabilities. Information regarding these students is not included in this report or in this table, but it does support the assertion that the interventions are also effective for students without disabilities.

Table 1 · Demographics of the ABC Project Districts

	ALAS	Belief	C & C
District Size	620,500	41,000	43,500
Intervention Students	77	71	259
Males	69%	72%	71%
Free/Reduced Lunch	94%	62%	75%
African American	8%	55%	60%
European American	0%	32%	29%
Hispanic American	91%	1%	2%
Native American	0%	0%	8%
Other	1%	11%	1%
English as First Lang.	39%	96%	98%

Poverty and *mobility* were among the many factors that contributed to the students' risk for school failure and dropping out. All ABC projects saw the influence of both poverty and mobility on significant portions of their students.

For the youth in these projects, *poverty* often meant:

- No telephone or inconsistent access to a telephone
- Frequent and serious health problems of a family member
- Living in crowded or poor housing; high crime and poor resource neighborhoods
- Dependence on public transportation or on friends and relatives with cars
- Low literacy skills of parents

For the youth in these projects, *mobility* often involved:

- Administrative transfers to other schools or to other programs
- Frequently changing residences

Typically, less than half of all students with disabilities in these urban areas remained in the same school for two years at a time. In one project site, less than one fifth of the students with emotional or behavioral disabilities stayed in the same school for two years.

A brief glimpse of the students served by the ABC projects is provided in the following descriptions.

■ Maria in Los Angeles

Maria, a student with learning disabilities who is of Latino descent, was ten when she was abandoned with her five younger siblings. Maria took care of these siblings for two weeks until the police discovered them. Both her mother and father are heroin addicts who are periodically imprisoned. Maria and her five brothers and sisters now live with their maternal grandparents, who also have guardianship of three other grandchildren. The grandparents speak only Spanish. The nine children and two grandparents receive $1205 per month from the government to cover food, housing, clothing, and other expenses. Maria suffers from frequent nose bleeds and depression, and is regularly absent from school.

■ Carl in Minneapolis

Carl, who is of European American descent, and his family lived in a shelter at the beginning of the school year. Shortly after that, they rented a one-bedroom apartment and moved into it. Carl's apartment contained three pieces of furniture: a mattress, a couch, and a chair. There was no telephone, nor was there a stove. Carl's family includes his older brother, his mother, and his mother's boyfriend. Carl's mother dropped out of high school and does not work. She struggles with mental health issues. The mother's boyfriend holds temporary employment positions. Carl's brother lives on and off at the family's apartment. Carl vacillates between attending school regularly and doing well in his classes, and being truant and in and out of jail for minor offenses. In general, Carl relates well to adults in school, but is socially isolated among his peers.

■ Roberta in Seattle

Roberta, who is of African American descent, lives with both parents in low income housing. She is eligible for free/reduced price lunch, but refuses to take it. She is often hungry in school and frequently borrows money from staff. She usually repays this money by selling candy for various causes. Roberta is labeled as having a learning disability, reading four years below grade level upon entering seventh grade. Incidents of severe acting out were reported in sixth grade, where she was viewed as having high potential, but as struggling in the existing middle school program. She has been disciplined for aggressive behavior toward classmates and teachers, but has had no reported legal infractions or incidents of drug or alcohol abuse.

Stressed Schools & Missing Actions

All the ABC projects' school districts were stressed. They were stressed by large numbers of students. They were stressed by the disproportionate number of students with significant problems of one type or another. They were stressed by a mismatch between the economic and cultural backgrounds of many students and the inability or unwillingness of some educators to accommodate students with situations or histories very different from their own. They were stressed by inability to access resources, either because the resources did not exist or because there was inadequate time and expertise to access them. They were stressed by efforts at restructuring and reforms of one type or another. And, they were stressed by a sense of failure. There was an uncomfortable feeling among administrators and staff that too many students were performing at levels much lower than they should be.

In these school districts, systematic procedures were not in place to address the dropout problem. Proactive and organized efforts were not implemented regularly to keep high-risk students attending the same school, or to prevent students from transferring or dropping in and out of school.

Many factors contributed to this "missing action" by schools. One was the mistaken perception that middle school students were too young to drop out. Another was the extremely high mobility rate of youth in urban areas, complicated by the tendency of students to drop out and return to school several times before completely dropping out. The distinction between the in-and-out behavior and dropping out was difficult to discern.

We know that students who repeatedly disengage at the middle school level are at great risk of not graduating. However, it is not easy to detect that this is happening, particularly when so many youth are moving between schools. It seems that students in the ABC project schools were unintentionally allowed to fall away from the system, with few adults even realizing that the students were disengaging from the school.

School policies and practices that perpetuated "push-out" from school were often the school's first response to initial signs of student withdrawal. For students whose behaviors challenged the system, policies were implemented that often were punitive or exclusionary in nature. These policies were used rather than approaches that might have modified the students' behavior in an instructional or inclusive way.

■ An Example of Stressed Schools

A frequent response to repeated tardies or skipped classes was suspension from school. For example, Michael had been in and out of a homeless shelter and he was often in temporary housing. When school staff realized that Michael had been absent, no one knew about his current residential problems. When the truancy officer attempted to pick Michael up to bring him to school, no one was home, and subsequent visits indicated the house was empty and the telephone disconnected. Neighbors didn't know where the family was.

When Michael turned up at school a week later, the school social worker learned he was in a shelter. The day after returning, Michael was referred for suspension by his physical education teacher because he hadn't brought his gym clothes, and had not admitted that he'd done anything wrong. His monitor finally convinced the assistant principals in the school that it was inappropriate to suspend Michael when he was living in a shelter and might not be able to get his clothes, and when he already was having school attendance problems. The assistant principals worked with the monitor to develop a contract with the student for improved attendance.

The next day when Michael refused to dress for gym, the teacher again referred him for not having gym clothes, for never attending classes, and for using inappropriate language. Michael was suspended for three days.

Unaccessed Resources

Project schools and the surrounding communities varied with respect to resource wealth. For example, in Los Angeles, resources were meager. Students and their families lived in a predominantly Latino community blighted by poverty. When provided, services were only available through short-term nonprofit community centers and community mental health centers. In Minneapolis, in contrast, the metropolitan areas in which the students lived were relatively resource rich, with multiple medical and social service options, shelters for

women, children, and families, and protective state laws – such as that prohibiting the termination of heat during the winter months. In Seattle, the availability of resources was somewhere in between. For families with health insurance, services were more attainable.

Nevertheless, whether resources were meager or rich, they tended not to be readily accessible or well utilized. Many factors contributed to the under-use of resources. Services were often fragmented and short-term. Programs intended to be helpful did not match the needs of the adolescents and were perceived by families as intrusive or culturally insensitive. Sometimes parents simply lacked the skills needed to be able to access resources. A good understanding, by parents, school staff, or students, of the resources that might be available did not exist, nor did an understanding of how to learn about or access support services. Bureaucratic systems impeded access to resources.

School staff, particularly teachers, often were unfamiliar with community resources and made few referrals. School staff who might have been helpful at accessing resources for youth who needed the support were overworked and overstressed, and typically only found time to access resources in a crisis-oriented fashion. Accessing services was characteristically time consuming.

■ An Example of Unaccessed Resources

Accessing services was a challenge for most students and families; assistance was needed, but not usually provided, unless by project staff or volunteers. For example, with a goal to increase the involvement of youth in school-based recreation activities, it was not possible to simply give the student the name and place of an activity – even if the student wanted very much to participate. Among the many steps that staff had to take to get a student successfully placed in an after-school activity, for example, was getting student and parent signatures on a permission form and on a request for participation fees to be waived. Getting these signatures, the forms filled out, and the understanding they represented often required a home visit by a project staff member.

Frequently, it was necessary to work with the staff of the after-school programs so that they would understand the students' needs. Even after the student was signed up and the activity staff understood the student's needs, project staff contributed to the co-staffing of some activities, attended the first session with the student, or arranged transportation for the student.

Questions about role responsibilities also contributed to unaccessed resources. Unclear delineation of which education staff members were actually responsible for helping a student or the family access resources was a continuing issue. Denial of responsibility was a staff member's way of protecting the little time available for planning and other activities.

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What Worked & How Do We Know?

Key Intervention Elements

Five interrelated intervention elements were identified as being effective in helping youth stay in school:

- Monitoring
- Relationships
- Affiliation
- Problem solving
- Persistence-Plus

Despite different approaches to the dropout problem, each of the ABC projects identified these as key elements of effective intervention. What did each of these entail?

■ Monitoring

In all projects, it was clear that someone needed to keep on top of what students were doing in school. This was the purpose of monitoring – to target the occurrence of risk behaviors and to measure the effects of interventions applied as a result of the occurrence of risk behaviors. Although some schools had computerized attendance and behavior records, they were not used in a way that provided *timely* information on the key indicators of risk that needed to be monitored. These indicators of risk included:

- Tardies
- Skipped classes
- Absenteeism
- Behavioral referrals
- Suspensions
- Poor academic performance

To be timely, information on occurrences of these "flags" had to be kept on a continual basis, and tabulated on a daily or weekly basis to determine whether a problem existed. Records needed to be kept on intervention strategies and results in order to keep track of what was tried and whether changes in risk behaviors occurred.

■ Relationships

Another key element of effective interventions is relationship building. Most often, relationship-building interventions in the ABC projects focused on the adult-student relationship. The foundation of the relationship was based on the premise that an adult associated

with the school cared about the student's educational experience, and both noticed and acknowledged the youth's educational progress. Students' absences would not pass without comment nor would their incremental improvements go unrecognized.

No single adult *role* was necessarily better suited than another to foster the relationship building with estranged students. The caring adult could be a principal, teacher, custodian, tutor, counselor, social worker, or school psychologist. The specific person is not the critical element. Rather, relationship building is a function of the availability of an adult who can demonstrate respect, caring, and interest in the student, keep abreast of what the student is doing, and communicate the importance of school to the student.

Relationship building was not limited to an adult and student pair. Interventions were designed to address the different contexts of influence in the youth's life, including home, school, and community. While each of the ABC projects allocated differing amounts of resources toward these contextual spheres of influence, building relationships between home and school was a priority among all three.

Parents were perceived as an important link to the adolescent's educational success. Project staff introduced multiple outreach strategies targeting family members of high-risk youth, including frequent reports on student progress, establishing reliable means of communication, conducting home visits, holding evening meetings, providing advocacy and problem-solving support, assisting with access to social and community services, sharing ideas regarding home conditions and activities that support student learning.

Outreach was intended to build relationships and trust between the school and family, so that these key adults could work together to promote students' educational success.

The person who served as monitor for a student often developed an important relationship with the student. For example, monitors demonstrated their caring by checking in on the student daily and offering support when needed. The success of the monitor was highly dependent on the trust that developed between the monitor and the student, often demonstrated by the student seeking out the monitor for informal discussions. Establishing trust was based in part on the monitor's willingness and effort to solve specific problems with students – as well as the "chemistry" between the monitor and student.

Teachers also were involved in relationship building. For example, during the first year, a successful teaching team worked hard at forming close, personal relationships with their students by "connecting" with each student each day, by inquiring about family members, and by taking interest in the students' lives outside the classroom.

■ Affiliation

Affiliation refers to the student's connection to the school and sense of belonging to the community of students and staff. Usually, this connection is promoted by the participation of the student in school-related activities. Frequently these activities are extracurricular, in which the student participates after school or sometime during the day.

When students are at risk for dropping out, affiliation with school is tenuous. Generally, these students have rejected organized school activities. Participation has to be facilitated – sometimes to the point of structuring new activities for students.

Community service-related activities, in which at-risk students "serve" other populations in need, are sometimes a very positive way of promoting affiliation with school. Included among the possible service-related activities are working as tutors for younger students experiencing difficulty with school and serving as preschool volunteers. Our experiences suggest that to the extent that service-related activities are tied to the school in some way, the more likely they are to foster affiliation with the school.

The student's connection to the school and sense of belonging often are promoted when the student participates in school activities. For example, students in one of the projects designed their own activities to facilitate student involvement in school-based activities. One class developed a hydroplane club, inspired by one of the teachers. The club built models, made field trips to local manufacturers, and was invited to attend local races. Students gained considerable prestige from their peers and family members for being involved in the club.

Service-related activities associated in some way with school also build affiliation. For example, in one project, students were able to earn credit for successfully participating in a community service tutoring program at an early childhood center next to the school. For two to five hours per week, students would assist in an early childhood classroom by reading and helping the youngsters with their creative and recreational activities.

■ Problem Solving

Problem-solving skills, particularly related to risk factors and staying in school, are critical to the survival of adolescents in challenging school, community, and home environments. These skills enable students to address their problems and think through solutions to them, rather than ignoring them or doing the first thing that comes into their heads.

Problem-solving skills also enable students to anticipate issues, and think them through before they arise. Project personnel helped students learn how to apply their problem-solving skills to avoid problems, such as when they thought about what they needed to do to graduate, avoid pregnancy, and a host of other future issues. In the ABC projects, students generally were taught to use a specific approach to solve problems.

Students were taught problem-solving skills to help them in their current conflicts and in thinking through potential issues. For example, in the Minneapolis project, students were taught a five-step plan to use to solve problems. The five steps were:

- Step One: *Stop! Think about the problem.*
- Step Two: *What are some choices?*
- Step Three: *Choose one.*
- Step Four: *Do it.*
- Step Five: *How did it work?*

Although the specific approach to developing problem-solving skills differed from one project to the next, all the ABC projects linked behavior and thinking about the problem in their approach to teaching problem-solving skills to students.

Students will use problem-solving skills during their entire lifetime. While some students may learn them on their own, many do not. They must be taught the skills. Problem-solving skills require practice. As students practice, they get better at solving problems and at solving more complex problems.

■ Persistence-Plus

Persistence, continuity, and consistency combine to form *Persistence-Plus*. When students reached a point of disengaging from school, school personnel needed to exhibit all three of these elements in efforts to reconnect students to the school. *Persistence* meant that there was someone who was not going to give up on the student or allow the student to be distracted from the importance of school. *Continuity* meant that there was someone who

knew the student's needs available throughout the school year, through the summer, and into the next year. *Consistency* meant that the message was the same from *all* concerned adults, only increasing or decreasing in intensity as conditions prescribed. To the extent possible, it was the same person providing continuity and consistency. When it wasn't possible, the same message was always given – *do the work, attend classes, be on time, express frustration in a constructive manner, and stay in school!*

Persistence-Plus was critical for students at risk for dropping out of school. For example, all the three ABC projects continued to work with students who had been repeatedly truant, suspended, or on the run. Even for students who had made the decision not to return to school, the "message" was clear from a key person who had connected with the student in the past: *it's important to be in school, and when you [the student] are ready, I will be available to help you return to school.*

■ All Together

Monitoring, relationship building, affiliation, problem solving, and persistence are all intertwined with each other. For monitoring to be successful, it must be consistent and visible to the student when risk behaviors start to show. Monitoring at its best will be done by the same person and requires at least weekly connections with the student. For relationships to support educational progress, they must focus on consistency, continuity, and persistence in the message that school is important and they must provide students with essential skills for solving problems in any setting – and everything must promote affiliation with the school so that additional supports for the student grow over time.

Evidence of Effectiveness: the Data

What are the important data to examine to determine the success of a middle school dropout prevention program? The most important outcome – eventual graduation from high school – cannot be examined until six or seven years after the beginning of an intervention that started in seventh grade. Only when students reach ninth grade is it possible to track the accrual of credits.

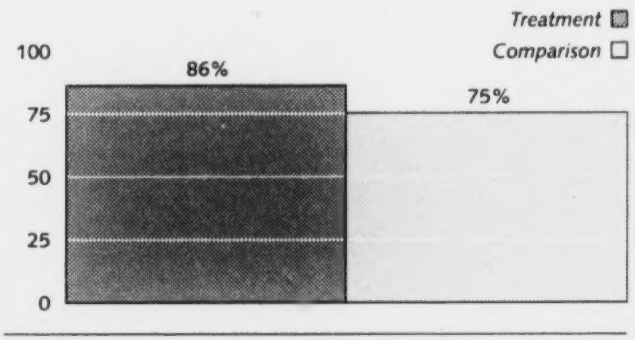
Thus, it's important to focus on factors that predict dropping out and those that most directly indicate students' school withdrawal. These factors include patterns of school mobility, poor attendance, and tardiness. They include signs of difficulties in school, both behavioral (referrals to the office, suspensions) and academic (poor grades, incomplete work). Factors that predict successful graduation from school include the inverse of many of these, plus measures of progress toward graduation (usually, credit accrual).

Each of the ABC projects collected data on these and other factors. One of the strengths of the three projects is that they collected some of the same data. For this summary, the following important pieces of evidence of effectiveness were examined:

- Enrollment in school
- Academic performance
- Progress towards graduation
- Attendance
- Problem behaviors
- Satisfaction

While we have information now on the six variables identified above, continued research is needed to be able to document the ultimate effect of the projects – keeping the students in school until they successfully graduate. See Appendix B for notes on the data.

Table 2 · Percentage of Students Enrolled in School

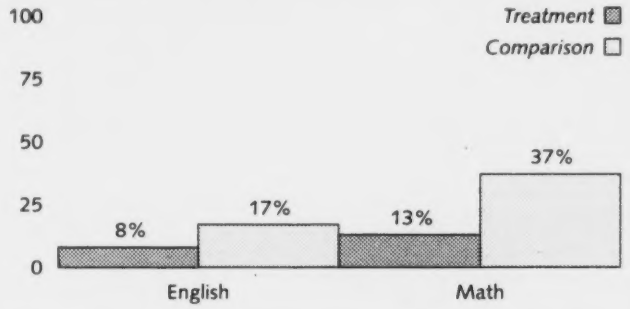


■ Enrollment in School

Remaining in school is the most basic measure of effect, for without continuation in school, the student cannot accumulate credits toward graduation. Continuation does not necessarily mean staying in the same school. Multiple options are available to students, all of which are considered here as legitimate. Students may move to a less restrictive placement such as into general education with no special education services, or may move to a more restrictive placement. Students may move to an alternative school designated specifically for those at risk. Students may enter various treatment programs that have an educational program as part of the day. While mobility is known to increase a student's risk for dropping out, one critical factor measured was whether a student was enrolled at the end of each year in an educational setting.

The extent to which students in the ABC projects were enrolled in school at the end of ninth grade is portrayed in Table 2.

Table 3 · Percentage of Classes Failed



■ Academic Performance

Academic performance can be measured in a variety of ways. One project examined the percentage of all classes passed. At the end of ninth grade, more of the treatment students (72%) were receiving passing grades compared to similar students in the comparison group (64%).

Another project examined performance by measuring failing grades received by students in English and Mathematics. Table 3 shows the percentage of students in the treatment and comparison groups who failed classes in ninth grade.

Table 4 · Percentage of Credits Earned

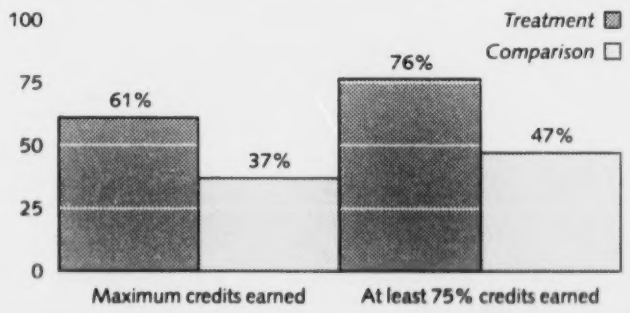


Table 5 · Percentage of Students Absent 25% or More of Ninth Grade School Year

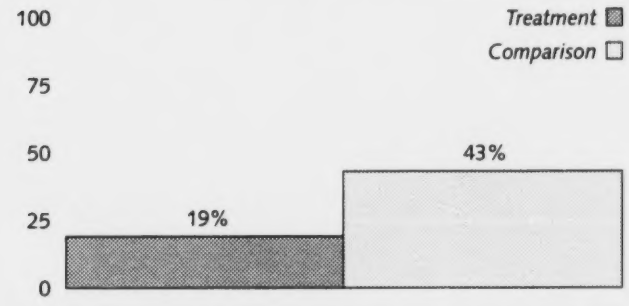


Table 6 · Teacher Ratings of Behavior by Percentile

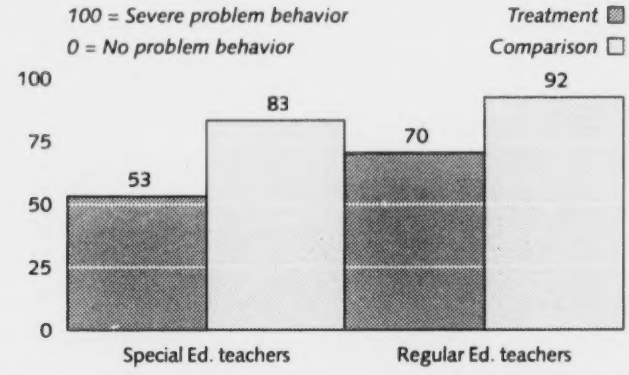
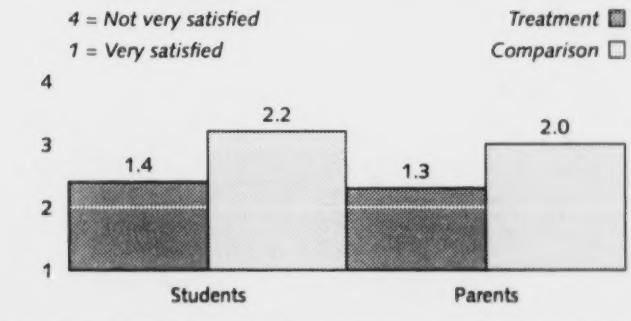


Table 7 · Student & Parent Satisfaction with School



■ Credits Toward Graduation

Requirements for graduation vary from state to state, and sometimes even from one district to another within a state. Thus, the percentage of credits earned toward graduation is used to measure students' progress across projects. Table 4 shows the percentage of students in two of the ABC projects who, by the end of ninth grade, were on track to graduate, earning at least 75 % of all possible credits needed for graduation.

■ Attendance

Attendance is a key indicator of a student's risk for dropping out of school. Before students enter high school, absenteeism usually has few consequences for students. In one project site, absenteeism was a problem in grades seven and eight for students in both the treatment and comparison groups, ranging between twenty-five and thirty days on average. However at the end of ninth grade, more of the students in the comparison group (55%) were at high risk for absenteeism, missing three or more days per month, than students in the treatment group (35%).

In high school, class grades are often tied to attendance, thus increasing its importance for students. When attendance is a problem, grades become a problem. When grades are a problem, the spiral toward dropping out is well on its way. The data in Table 5 exemplify the attendance of students in ninth grade in another ABC project.

■ Problem Behaviors

Different criteria exist for measuring problem behavior from one school to the next, and even from one teacher to the next within a school. Still, the extent to which a student engages in problem behaviors, however defined in the context, is associated with that student's risk for dropping out of school.

Suspension from school is a commonly used indicator and is a strong predictor of dropping out. In eighth grade, the average

number of days suspended from school for treatment students in one of the projects was one. This contrasts dramatically with the average seven-day suspensions for students in the comparison group.

Teacher ratings of student behavior is another indicator of risk. Table 6 shows special education and regular education teacher ratings of treatment and comparison students' problem behavior, at the end of ninth grade.

■ Satisfaction

Satisfaction with school, by students and by their parents, is a critical factor in whether students stay in school. Using a 1 to 4 scale where "1" equalled *very satisfied with school* and "4" equalled *not very satisfied*, treatment and comparison students in one of the projects rated their satisfaction with school differently. These ratings are shown in Table 7.

In another site, teachers were asked to rate the value of the dropout intervention in relation to the extra demands the efforts placed on them. Over 90% of the teachers responded favorably, with 52% of the teachers indicating the demands were "doable" and another 41% reporting they were "worthwhile."

Evidence of Effectiveness: Perspectives

The ABC projects also collected non-quantitative evidence of intervention effectiveness for students with disabilities at risk for dropping out of school. The perspectives of individuals who participated in the project were particularly strong. There was other evidence as well, such as changes in policies. We present here a sampling of "perspectives."

- Schools that previously relied solely on out-of-school suspensions established in-school suspension policies during the project and have maintained them so that students are not sent home when suspended.
- On their own, individual teachers adopted the monitoring procedures used by the projects, sometimes in part and sometimes in spirit.
- Parents reported that they used problem solving and connecting skills with siblings of the students in the project.
- A parent wrote to one project: *I would like to thank the program because I am convinced that it is a very good program. It helped my son a lot. It helped me to understand and recognize things that I never knew. For example, I did not know that there were credits in report cards. Now thanks to* [the program] *not just do I know this but I also understand it. Thank you again.*
- Parents reported feeling more confident and knowledgeable when dealing with the school system after they had experienced the monitoring system with their adolescent.
- A parent wrote about the effects of one project: *Thank you for the help you have given my daughter Gabriela. At first, Gabriela did not want to come because she thought that this was a program for dummies. Later she realized that she was improving and that this program was good for her. By participating in this program she was able to see things clearly. This year she experienced a great change. She stopped being truant and started to pay more attention to her studies. Her grades have improved. Now she does not want to be absent to school. I think that programs like this should be in all schools. What I like most about this program is that it helps students increase their self-esteem.*

- Teachers and parents both reported that they understood and trusted each other better as a result of regular participation in evening problem-solving meetings, held in accessible neighborhood locations.
- A principal wrote to one project: *The dropout prevention project is highly beneficial to* [our school] *in particular and to the school district in general. We are providing services to our students that encompass their whole lives and the development of lifetime self-advocacy skills. I want to stress the importance of taking a long-range perspective on the dropout issue and to endorse the need to carry on the effort of keeping students engaged in school throughout their high school program. Efforts have been successful at the middle school level,* [yet] *without continual monitoring to support students staying in school throughout the completion of their high school program, my concern is many of these students will not complete high school.*

What We Have Learned About Families, School Staff, & School Policies

■ About Parents & Families

- Almost without exception, parents and family members want their kids to complete school.
- Parents and family members participate in school functions if provided appropriate and effective communication, support, encouragement, and resources.
- Parents and students welcome school staff into their home and their community
- The relationship between parents and students may or may not be appropriate for promoting the student's school completion; some students will benefit dramatically from having their families more involved in the school, while other students will need to figure out how to make progress toward school completion without parental support.

■ About School Staff

- For "at-risk" students to stay in school, out-of-school issues must be addressed – use of out-of-school time, family problems, mobility issues (moving from aunt to uncle and back), proper clothes for school, concern for parents' health and sobriety. Students are relieved if staff are aware of conditions – even if staff can't really do much about them.
- School staff must help facilitate and coordinate student involvement with community organizations – including the court system – helping students or parents get treatment for the youth and family services.
- Students will trust and build relationships with almost any adult at the school site if the adult is valuing, persistent, reliable, and honest with the student – gender and ethnic match is not as important (after an initial rapport-building period) as the ethic of caring and persistence on the part of the adult.
- School staff need intensive inservice regarding perceptions of the following:
  - Safety of the city
  - Parents' intentions or feelings for their adolescents, and their desire for them to remain in school

  - Court system
  - Adolescent mental health needs
  - How to locate and interact with other community agencies
  - Cost to society when a student permanently disengages from school
- School staff will need extra resources to help them engage "at risk" students in school, while at the same time other responsibilities increase.
- Special education staff need to be more informed about special education law and student due process rights as well as district special education policies.

About School Policies

- School administration needs to look at suspension and transfer policies, with the goal being to reduce the use of these and other exclusionary practices.
- School administration needs to let staff know that keeping students in school is a major goal. While staff are often relieved when a high behavior profile student departs from school, standard practices to retrieve these youth are not in place.
- Districts need to design a means of keeping supportive staff in consistent locations with students, even if students' families move about the city.
- Schools need to stay in touch with students when in treatment settings – so that the adolescents' transition back to school is easier.
- Total integration into the mainstream, as it is currently implemented, may place secondary students with learning or emotional disabilities at higher risk for dropping out of school. A regular connection with special education is more conducive to staying engaged in school.

4

Recommendations

A deliberate, concerted effort is required to meet National Education Goal 2 by the year 2000. To achieve a 90 percent high school graduation rate, educators must recognize the need to support high-risk students in their quest to graduate from high school and the societal costs of failing to do so.

Based on the work of the ABC projects, we offer the following recommendations to administrators who are interested in ensuring that all students graduate from high school:

■ Develop a System to Monitor Student Progress Toward Graduation

The monitoring system should track alterable signs of student engagement or indicators of risk, such as absenteeism, chronic tardiness, late homework assignments, failing course grades, behavioral referrals to the office, and multiple suspension incidents.

Our experience is that students at risk of dropping out benefit from a relationship with monitors who are education staff and who can establish a relationship characterized by *persistence plus*. For these relationships to exist, the educator must be one who: A) is not going to give up on the student (persistence), B) maintains contact with the student across academic years (continuity), and C) strives to deliver a common message from concerned adults about the importance of schooling and graduation (consistency).

Ideally, given the mobility of students, the monitor would move with the student from one school to another to maintain the relationship. If this is not possible, there are a number of transition strategies that can be employed (such as visiting the new school with the student and identifying a contact person at the new school).

■ Form a Team of Stakeholders to Develop Intervention Strategies for High-Risk Students

A true team approach facilitates trust between parents and educators, and provides opportunities for ongoing dialogue about ways to make a difference in students' lives. Based on our experiences, we believe the team should include representatives for parents, educators, community professionals, and students. The team should meet regularly.

We encourage collaboration across stakeholders to help modify school policies and practices that alienate students, to create alternative ways to build student affiliation with school, and to maintain open communication between home and school.

The development of effective intervention strategies for students who are demonstrating signs of disengagement from school is contingent upon information sharing across the important contexts for student development: school, home, and community. Therefore, we encourage teams to establish a regular and reliable communication system between home and school about students' specific behavioral risk factors. Establishing a personal school-based contact for parents is an important part of this system.

Integrated services are needed to address specific family conditions – mobility, poverty, and family support for mental health and substance abuse issues. While integrated services are not the sole responsibility of schools, we believe educators need to collaborate with

community professionals to address specific needs of high-risk families in order to promote better educational outcomes for some students.

■ Establish a Systematic Way to Measure the Effectiveness of Interventions for Students

The experiences of the ABC projects indicate that educators need to consider the following indicators as signs of successful intervention: improved attendance rates and academic performance, increased student participation and involvement in school, reduction in behavioral referrals, and progress toward graduation (i.e., accrual of credits). These indicators need to be monitored and used as criteria to evaluate the educational program, policies, and remediation strategies.

The purpose of measuring the effectiveness of interventions is to assess whether the strategies are working, and when needed, to revise interventions so they continue to be effective. Monitoring effectiveness should be considered an integral aspect of the intervention, not something apart from it. And, as improvement is documented, it can become reinforcing for students, families, and staff.

■ Create Support Mechanisms to Help Staff and Others Reach Out to High-Risk Youth

Supports are needed to help staff keep high-risk youth engaged in school. In most schools, there are few rewards for reaching out and retaining students, often because they are challenging to have in the classroom and the school building. The disincentives associated with reaching out are problematic and include extra personal expenses, negative feedback from other staff, and the challenges from the students themselves.

Consider the following strategies for providing support to educators who do reach out to high-risk youth:

- Make it a school goal to reach out to high-risk youth and to keep them in school.
- Reinforce staff and schools for bringing students back into school.
- Provide time for teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and other school personnel to support each other in their efforts to reach out to high-risk youth.
- Be an administrative leader who actively provides incentives for students to remain in school and avenues for students to return to school.
- Make resources available to staff, such as school supplies, mileage, bus tokens, and food allowances.

Providing these and other mechanisms that support educators will make it less likely that they get frustrated with the system and give up their efforts to keep high-risk youth engaged in school.

■ Provide Coordinated Professional Staff Development

Staff development is needed in several areas directed toward helping educators meet National Education Goal 2. Suggested topics include:

- Effective dropout prevention strategies
- Family outreach

- Relationship-building activities
- Reading instruction at the secondary level
- Alternative approaches for highly aggressive, acting-out youth

A deliberate effort to increase school completion, particularly for high-risk students, requires the input and contributions of educators, families, students, and community professionals. While this effort takes time and ongoing commitment, we believe that the collective effort of all concerned adults to develop *persistence plus* for students offers promise in reducing the number of students who drop out of school.

Appendices

A ▪ The Federal Initiative

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), established three cooperative agreements under a program competition called "Dropout Prevention and Intervention Programs for Junior High School Students in Special Education." The programs were to focus on youth with learning and emotional/behavioral disabilities, with priority given to programs using a collaborative approach across spheres of influence – home, school, and community. Projects were funded from 1990 to 1995 to develop, refine, and evaluate dropout prevention and intervention strategies. This booklet is one of a series of five collaboratively developed products.

■ ALAS

ALAS stands for "Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success" and means "wings" in Spanish. The ALAS program focused on adolescents and their families, school, and community. ALAS was founded on the premise that the youth and their contexts of influence must be addressed simultaneously if dropout prevention efforts are to be successful. Assumptions central to the model are that each context needs individual reform to increase its positive influence on youth, and that barriers to communication and coherence between contexts must be bridged.

■ Belief Academy

Belief Academy consisted of five major components: program stability over time; intensive academic and behavioral intervention in grades seven and eight; family case management services; social support to students; and program options and ongoing support at the high school level. The Academy was based on several assumptions relating to students' skills in reading and math: the need for intensive instructional procedures with culturally relevant instruction; the needs of family or out-of-school activities that interfere with student progress; students' affiliation with the school program; the self-esteem and confidence of individual students; and the need for students and their families to constantly focus on and plan for post high school goals, in conjunction with a long-term support program that provides viable options for the goals to be achieved.

■ Check & Connect

Check & Connect addressed the interacting systems of family, school, and community. "Check" involves continuous assessment of student levels of engagement with school by monitoring daily incidences of tardiness, absences, behavior referrals, suspensions, failing grades, and mobility. "Connect" involves both monthly core connect strategies, and the addition of supplemental interventions when youth engaged in risk behaviors. This project is based on four assumptions: solving the dropout problem will require a multicomponent effort of home, school, community, and youth; leaving school prior to graduation is not an instantaneous event; students must be empowered to take control of their own behavior; and schools must be designed to reach out to families in partnership with the community.

B ■ Notes on the Data

Data for this report were drawn from *Staying in School: A Technical Report of Three Dropout Prevention Projects for Middle School Students with Learning and Emotional Disabilities.* The technical report presents detailed case studies of the projects, each of which includes information on samples of students, methodology, data, and results of statistical analyses. The information reported in this document is based on the second of two cohorts of students from each of the ABC projects. Where data were comparable, the information was collapsed and reported in aggregate. The term *treatment group* refers to the students with disabilities who received intervention for at least two years (grades seven and eight). Some treatment students, where noted, received intervention through ninth grade. The term *comparison group* refers to students with disabilities (with characteristics similar to those of youth in the treatment group) who did not receive intervention.

Data on the six factors were derived in the following manner:

- ***Enrollment in school:*** Data were aggregated across all three projects, using ninth grade, cohort two data. *In school* included students enrolled in any educational setting (traditional, alternative, treatment, corrections) at the end of the school year. *Not in school* included students who had dropped out or were not known to be continuing at the end of the school year.
- ***Academic performance:*** Data were reported separately for two projects, using ninth grade, cohort two data. The term *passing* was defined as earning a letter grade of D or better. Classes *failed* were those in which students received a grade of F or NC (no credit). One should note that this information on students who received passing grades in all of their classes was not reported in the technical report.
- ***Credits toward graduation:*** Data were aggregated across two projects, using ninth grade, cohort two data. Students who earned at least three quarters of the total possible credits for ninth grade were considered to be on track to graduate.
- ***Attendance:*** Data were reported separately for two projects, using ninth grade, cohort two data. Note that the information on students at *high risk for absenteeism*, defined as missing three or more days per month, was not reported in the technical report. The comparison group in this analysis reflects the students who received intervention in grades seven and eight, but not in grade nine. If the data were available, we would expect that an even larger percentage of the comparison students who received no intervention in grades seven and eight would be at high risk for absenteeism.
- ***Problem behaviors:*** Data were reported from one project, using cohort two data from grades eight and nine. The suspension data reflect behavior during eighth grade. The teacher ratings of students' problem behavior in ninth grade were derived from the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), developed by Gresham and Elliott (1990) and described in *Social Skills Rating System* (Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service, Inc.). The SSRS documents the perceived frequency of behaviors that influence students' development. The raw scores were converted into percentile ranks. The larger the score, the more problematic the behavior. One should note that these data were not reported in the technical report.
- ***Satisfaction:*** Data were reported separately from two projects, using results from a sample of all students, parents and teachers who participated in the projects. The instruments were developed by each of the projects to specifically assess participants' satisfaction with school and their satisfaction in relation to the project interventions.

ABC Dropout Prevention & Intervention Series Publications

- *PACT Manual: Parent and Community Teams for School Success*
- *Relationship Building & Affiliation Activities in School-Based Dropout Prevention Programs*
- *Staying in School: Strategies for Middle School Students with Learning & Emotional Disabilities*
- *Staying in School: A Technical Report of Three Dropout Prevention Projects for middle School Students with Learning and Emotional Disabilities*
- *Tip the Balance: Practices & Policies That Influence School Engagement for Youth at High Risk for Dropping Out*